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"Referred to the Librarian, With Power to Act": Herbert Putnam and the Boston Public Library

Jane Aikin
Researcher, U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities
Washington, USA

Abstract:

Herbert Putnam was Librarian of the Boston Public Library between February 1895 and April 1899, the first experienced librarian to hold that post since Charles Coffin Jewett (1855-68). This paper reviews the circumstances surrounding his appointment and discusses his accomplishments, including expansion of the library system, services for scholars, services to the schools, the addition of new departments, and a new staff classification and promotion system. The physical problems of the Library's new building and the resulting renovation are also addressed.

Most people think of Herbert Putnam only as the Librarian of Congress (April 1899-July 1939). His early career, however, encompassed libraries and the law. Between 1884 and 1891 he was in Minneapolis, Minnesota--first as librarian of the Athenaeum, an endowed private subscription library, and then as director of the city's new Public Library, to which the Athenaeum was joined. From 1892 to 1895 he practiced law in Boston. Early in 1895, just as the Boston Public Library moved into its new building on Copley Square, its Board of Trustees invited him to become Librarian.

As the sixth son of George Palmer Putnam, Herbert Putnam was only eleven when three of his elder brothers took over the Putnam publishing house, and his career lay elsewhere. He graduated from Harvard in 1883 and attended law school at Columbia, but soon became intrigued with library administration. From the beginning of his library career he never held any post in a library other than that of director, and he made every important decision (and most of the less important ones as well) at every

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institution he served. He planned the Minneapolis Public Library building, hired its first staff, established its first branch libraries, and instituted its work with teachers and schools. Also in Minneapolis, he installed modern systems of charging books and of cataloging and classifying, and most important, he placed collections of books on open shelves where readers could readily use them.[1]

As a novice, Putnam seems to have modeled his policies at least partly on Justin Winsor's administration of the Boston Public Library. But it is important to take note of his work in Minneapolis because it prepared him so well for the later posts in Boston and Washington, D.C.[2] His Boston administration was patterned on what he had accomplished in Minneapolis, and he applied his experience at both to the Library of Congress. But before appraising his work, let us survey the Boston situation as it was at the time that Putnam moved his family to that city to be near Mrs. Putnam's mother, who was seriously ill.

Walter Muir Whitehill, the historian of the Boston Public Library, declares that when Justin Winsor "crossed the Charles River to Cambridge in September 1877, the Boston Public Library wandered into a wilderness from which it did not emerge for eighteen years."[3] The trustees soon named a new Librarian: Judge Mellen Chamberlain, formerly of the Boston Municipal Court; but Chamberlain by his own account found the library "running itself" quite well as Winsor had left it. In fact, the trustees were the chief administrators of the institution during his tenure. When Chamberlain retired in 1890, the trustees at length appointed Theodore Frelinghuysen Dwight, but undercut his authority by designating a subordinate, Louis F. Gray, as clerk of the corporation. Dwight left the library after only eighteen months' service.[4]

The Boston trustees' opposition to professional expertise was particularly annoying to the rapidly growing library profession, and at a dinner given by Boston publishers and printers on September 19, 1890 for visiting members of the American Library Association, William Frederick Poole did not allow politeness to forestall criticism. As a specialist in library architecture and librarian of Chicago's Newberry Library, Poole complained at length in his after-dinner remarks about the impracticality of the plans for Boston's palatial new Florentine Renaissance building and about the fact that librarians had not been consulted about its design. His speech provoked a heated response by Samuel A. B. Abbott, president of the Board of Trustees, in the Boston newspapers while the editors of *Library Journal* and the *Nation* defended Poole.[5] The incident more than irked local pride; it publicized the small esteem of the profession for the second largest library in the nation. Two years later another prominent library leader, Charles Soule, published in the *Boston Herald* a series of letters scathingly accusing the Board of mismanagement, of ignoring the needs of the public and the schools, and of perpetuating "cultural exclusiveness" while disdaining modern library administration.[6] As a trustee of the Brookline, Massachusetts Public Library, Soule was well-informed, and his criticism was hard to rebut.

Putnam had arrived in Boston when the *Herald* published Soule's letters, and he was probably aware of the controversy. But he carried out his plan to practice law, refusing an 1893 invitation to become librarian of Brown University. With the new library building scheduled to open in February 1895, however, the library profession again tried to exercise its influence in Boston: Caleb B. Tillinghast, librarian of the Massachusetts State Library, wrote to Board member Josiah H. Benton, Jr., recommending thirty-three-year-old Herbert Putnam as the best possible candidate for librarian. Describing the young lawyer as "live, progressive and industrious" with "the energy and nerve that could ensure success," Tillinghast clearly thought that Putnam's appointment could restore Boston Public to leadership status in the library world.[7] Members of the library board in Minneapolis also wrote on his behalf; for example, University of Minnesota President Cyrus Northrop, and Samuel Hill, president of the Minneapolis Trust Company. Among other testimonials, they noted that Harvard President Charles Eliot had described Putnam as one of the three best librarians in the country. Coincidentally, with the new library completed, Abbott planned to retire from the Board, and three other members had recently resigned. By early February the Board had a majority of new members, and Abbott joined them to unanimously elect Putnam Librarian.[8]

When Herbert Putnam walked up the steps to take charge on February 11, 1895, a unique opportunity lay before him: the Boston Public Library, "the oldest of large American public libraries" now had the "first great municipal library building in the country." Its collection of over 600,000 volumes ranked second in number only to the Library of Congress, and in quality the Boston collection was arguably superior, since it boasted numerous gifts of not only rare and unusual material, but entire special collections. Putnam's task was to convince the Board to allow him to bring modern professional administration to the library. And with the supreme self-confidence that he habitually displayed, he moved quickly.[9] After three months, the trustees named him clerk of the Corporation, providing him the entrée to their meetings, and the Board's minutes soon began to include the phrase "referred to the Librarian, with power to act."[10] Within the year, the trustees publicly declared that the responsibility for meeting "the just wants of the public" must belong to the Librarian, and they codified that statement in their By-Laws.[11] The trustees still had to approve any changes Putnam wanted to make, and any titles he wanted to add; the Librarian had to submit weekly and monthly written reports, and each year the Board appointed an Examining Committee to evaluate the institution. But both the Board and successive Examining Committees clearly held the Librarian's recommendations in great esteem. As Putnam's contribution to the *Annual Report* became longer each year, the Board's and Examiners' reports just as punctually shrank.

A month after Putnam took charge, he installed a new system of graded service under which both appointments to the library staff and promotion from grade to grade would be achieved through examination. There were five grades, each with a minimum and maximum salary, and after reaching the highest salary within a grade employees could apply for promotion, which depended upon both examination and excellence of previous service. The system created as the Librarian observed "both hope and despondency " among the staff, since it favored the enterprising and the accomplished over the less educated and less energetic.[12] A series of new appointments followed, making it evident that Putnam would select his staff with care. Perhaps most interesting is the fact that women, whose appointment to major administrative posts was not necessarily accepted in the profession, filled important positions--for example, auditor, and the key posts of chief of the Ordering Department and chief of the Issue Department.[13]

With an expert staff, Putnam could set high standards for library service. Entirely characteristic of his ideas was an early request to readers to report their difficulties. For example, since the book delivery system proved deficient, he posted a notice asking users to wait fifteen minutes and then notify the staff of the delay. "Such a complaint will not be deemed an intrusive grievance, but a service," it read. Likewise, he asked the staff to keep careful records of unfilled requests and to tabulate the reasons for failure so that deficiencies could be remedied. Staff members were asked to assist users to the extent of their ability, but also to "see to it that every . . . person having complaint or grievance, whether just or unjust, or unable to get the material he desires in the ordinary course" be sent to the Librarian's office to discuss the matter privately with Putnam himself. Given these examples of courtesy, the spirit of what the 1895 Examining Committee called "gracious helpfulness" became a Boston Public Library norm.[14]

Among other events of that first year, Putnam opened "The Juvenile Room," probably the first room devoted to service for children in any of the large public libraries in this country,[15] and he had a *Selected List for Younger Readers* compiled as a common listing of the open shelf collections he had begun to purchase for the Central Library and all nine branch libraries. Cooperation with the schools, a persistent theme of his work in Minneapolis, soon appeared in Boston, encouraged by enhancing borrowing privileges for teachers, by locating library delivery stations in several public schools, by providing topical lists of books for students' research and general reading, by sending collections of reproductions of art works and photos to the branches, and by welcoming classes to the library.[16] Having also opened a new branch library, extended evening hours from nine to ten, and begun providing service on Sundays for the first time, Putnam accomplished a great deal during that first year. The Examining Committee expressed satisfaction with his administration in their year-end report, and in an editorial published April 6, 1896, the *Boston Herald* commented that the Librarian had not "lost himself in the routine work of library

management," but had "risen to the conception of what the Public Library should be to the people of Boston."[17]

The ensuing years saw major development of the system of branch libraries begun by Justin Winsor.[18] To bring the branches closer to the Central Library, Putnam created in 1896 the position of Supervisor of Branches and Stations "to unify the outlying system, to strengthen the collection of books, to improve the equipment, and to introduce uniform and modern methods of administration."[19] The Supervisor scheduled regular meetings for branch personnel with the central library staff, attendance at library professional meetings, and inter-branch visits. Both the children's section and the open shelf system were introduced in the branches; new collections of reference books were purchased for them; topical collections of book were sent to them when teachers requested resources, all cataloging was moved to the Central Library for greater efficiency; and a reclassification of all branch collections to a common system began in 1898.

The smallest units of the system, delivery stations, were in 1895 "no more than a desk in a shop" whose proprietor received $250 per year for sending in requests for books to the central library and distributing them to requesters. But with a circulation of less than 5,000 volumes a year, the stations were not cost-effective. Putnam decided to reduce the unit cost by increasing circulation. He asked the proprietors each to set aside a separate room, in which a 300 to 500-volume collection, table and chairs were installed, and he promised in return compensation based on the number of volumes circulated per month.[20] As a result of this incentive system, circulation in deposit stations more than doubled, and new delivery wagons conspicuously labeled "Boston Public Library," which transported books among all the libraries daily, also periodically rotated the delivery station collections.

Convinced that the library got more out of the new arrangement because it was to the proprietor's advantage to make the space attractive, advertise the collection, and provide service, Putnam did admit one disadvantage: the users and consequently the proprietors constantly clamored for more fiction. With the proportion of fiction to nonfiction in library branches and stations maintained at a little more than three-fifths fiction, such demands conflicted with Putnam's objective of raising "the character of the reading by rendering locally accessible in these collections books of a serious nature which might be examined without formality and drawn without delay." The first superintendent of branches, Hiller Wellman, nevertheless advocated allowing some books without much literary merit, "as stepping-stones to better reading," and once admitted to a "systematic endeavor to avoid respectable dulness."[21] Wellman considered lowering the rate of compensation (which on February 1, 1898 was $12 for the first three hundred books and two cents for each additional volume) for circulating fiction, but for unstated reasons, found that solution impractical. Putnam's remedy was to provide more guidance for readers, and by 1899 five of the stations had become "reading rooms," each with a library employee in charge, and with enriched collections that included reference books and periodicals.[22]

Expanding the number of delivery stations each year greatly increased access to the library's resources, but Putnam and Wellman also added small groups, at first of 25 and later of 50 books, for rotating deposits in public buildings. By the end of Putnam's tenure the number of branches had increased by only one, but there were five reading rooms and thirteen delivery stations. Twenty-two fire stations received books regularly, as did one post office; four public schools, and five specialized schools. Readership expanded amazingly. On January 1, 1895, there were 29,871 card holders, but that number increased by the thousands annually until on February 1, 1899, there were 72,005--a 141 percent increase. Circulation had climbed from 279,494 volumes circulated from the central library to 422,849, while branch library book use rose from 567,827 to 822,993.[23] The deposit collection of 8,000 books, segmented to rotate constantly among 48 different locations, recorded more than 150,000 circulations in 1898.

An important weakness of the branches and deposit stations in 1895 was that nearly half the requests users sent to the Central Library were for books that the library did not own, partly because there was no printed list of library holdings.[24] In 1896 Putnam established the position of Editor of Library Publications and replaced the quarterly *Boston Public Library Bulletin,* which cost 25 cents, with a free *Monthly Bulletin* of current accessions and selected topical lists. He also began a selected *Annual List* of new books and

issued subject bibliographies--all printed on the Library's new linotype machine, while a second machine, especially adapted by the manufacturer to print diacritical marks, produced printed catalog cards. The linotype also provided all the Library's stationery, call slips, signs, and other needed items, and linotype slugs were stored, for example, from the *Bulletin* so that they could be used later to print the *Annual List*. The adaptation of the linotype to catalog cards, a pioneering application, awakened such wide interest among librarians that the Boston Public Library printing operation was the subject of an exhibit at the 1898 International Conference of Librarians in London.[25]

Also in 1896, the Librarian began creating special services for scholars. An interlibrary loan service was established, and the Library advertised the availability of a public stenographer to search for and supply materials from the collections to researchers and institutions at a distance and a "photograph room" in which copies might be made of manuscripts, plates or other material. A union list of periodicals held by Boston libraries appeared in 1897.[26] Lectures and exhibitions began to be scheduled, held on the upper floor reserved for the specialized collections and departments and using their resources. By the end of 1898, drawing on his experience in organizing a Department of Periodicals and Public Documents in Minneapolis, and using as a core collection the recently donated library of the American Statistical Association, the Librarian had set up a new Department of Documents and Statistics with Worthington Chauncey Ford, the former Chief of the U. S. Treasury Department's Bureau of Statistics, in charge.

Putnam's greatest administrative difficulties were caused by the new building. The old library had accommodated up to 250 readers, but the new building could hold nearly 900, and the cost of coal more than tripled; cleaning costs went up 133 percent, and the engineering, janitorial and repair staff increased from four to sixteen, including a painter and a "marble polisher." Because the three main stack areas were not connected, processing call-slips required eight employees instead of three; and the Issue Department required 43 staff members where 20 had previously sufficed. The trustees had requested a $215,000 annual appropriation for the new library, but the city provided only $175,000. Thus some library departments were not opened until late in 1895, furniture needs went unmet, book purchasing ceased for a brief period, salaries were decreased and some staff terminated, and the Library closed early to save on expenses.

The staff soon discovered the building's many physical defects. The power plant was not large enough to run the lighting and the ventilation systems, but the engines were noisy enough to annoy readers in the periodical room above. The basement was too damp to allow storage of periodicals and newspapers. The architect had provided for a single passenger elevator but no service elevator, lighting was too dim in several reading rooms, and the ornate walls lacked clocks. Call-slips dropped out of the containers and remained lost in the pneumatic tube system. The book railway repeatedly broke down. Transporting oversized books by the book elevators proved impossible without delay and damage, with the result that the collections of architecture, fine art, technical arts and music all had to be moved to the Special Libraries floor. The cards in the card catalogue had been punched to fit the rods, but many shelf numbers were punched out in the process, making it impossible for users to record them correctly. Yet despite the problems, the number of users surpassed all expectations: the Newspaper and Periodical Rooms, the Children's Room, and even Bates Hall, the vast general reading room, were constantly crowded.

Since it was immediately evident that extensive changes were needed, by 1898 the trustees obtained authorizing legislation and an act of the city council that provided a special appropriation of $100,000 for doubling the size of the Children's Room and the Ordering Department, moving the Newspaper Room and returning that space to its intended use as a lecture hall, building library administrative offices and adding the old office space to the Delivery Room, where improved tubes and carriers provided for the first time complete intercommunication among the three stack areas.[27] A new Branch Division office, offices for the Editor, and the chiefs of the Issue and Ordering Departments, and space for a staff lunchroom and locker rooms were laid out. Rooms were constructed for the chief janitor, the custodian of library supplies, and for sorting collection duplicates. Workmen installed two additional elevators. Putnam dryly noted that "in the case of the heating and ventilating system, the total work actually done has

exceeded by a hundred per cent the work originally planned," but the extent of the frustration of trustees, staff, and users became even more obvious when he commented that only the "most embarrassing difficulties have been overcome, and the most pressing needs of the moment have been met."[28]

Characteristically, on the very next page of Putnam's 1898 report, he turned to a review of the needs of the branch libraries, terming them "ill-proportioned to existing needs" and condemning one branch located "in a neighborhood tending to demoralize its readers," as "meagre, ill-ventilated, inconvenient and uninviting." Estimating the cost of essential alterations systemwide at $500,000, and echoing several years' worth of complaints from the Examining Committee, he added that "A supreme advantage would be the application of such a sum all at once under a general scheme of improvement." But while the city appropriation had grown to $245,000 by 1899, the loss of income from fines and from the sale of the old library building (which had been returning rental costs to the budget), while staff and maintenance costs increased meant that the book budget showed an actual decrease.[29]

At this juncture, President William McKinley asked Putnam to become Librarian of Congress. His work in Boston had greatly enhanced his professional reputation: he was one of a group of American Library Association leaders testifying before Congress in 1896 regarding the status and role of the Library of Congress, and he had been elected president of the Association in 1898, succeeding the deceased Justin Winsor. Putnam resigned his position reluctantly,[30] for the Library of Congress salary was less, its political demands were far more intense, and the challenges were even greater than those he faced in Boston. But he found the call to the national library, with the prospect of extending library services--on not only the federal level but to every library in the land--extremely compelling. Sending his resignation to the trustees on March 18, 1899, Putnam received their gratitude for "the harmonious and helpful relations between the Librarian and the Trustees from the day he accepted office; the remarkable administrative qualities he has shown--in directing the alterations . . . in increasing to so large a degree the interest the public takes in the Library, until today it has a larger constituency than any other--in instituting so successfully the work of the Public Library in connection with the Public Schools--and in making the public realize that this institution created and supported by it, really belongs to it, and needs its ever-enlarging patronage and generosity."[31]

As we look back on Herbert Putnam's career, it seems evident that one of the most important lessons he learned in Minneapolis and Boston was the value of allying private wealth with public institutions. Particularly in Boston the rich special collections--among them the Ticknor collection of Spanish literature, the Bowditch collection of mathematics, the Lewis collection of early printed books on America, the Allen A. Brown music library and the Chamberlain collection of autographs--provided the distinction of fine research holdings to a municipal institution. Endowed libraries, identified by name with the original donor, Putnam observed, sooner or later would lack the necessary funds for administration while public institutions funded on an ongoing basis could freely invite benefactors to share the honors of association.[32] He was fortunate to enjoy this advantage in Boston, for it would take fully a quarter century of his hard work before the Library of Congress equaled the Boston Public Library in either splendor of collections or munificence of donors.

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[1]Gratia A. Countryman, "Mr. Putnam and the Minneapolis Public Library," pp. 5-9 in William Warner Bishop and Andrew Keogh, eds., *Essays Offered to Herbert Putnam By His Colleagues and Friends on his Thirtieth Anniversary as Librarian of Congress, 5 April 1929* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929); David Chambers Mearns, "Herbert Putnam: Librarian of the United States, The Minneapolis Years," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 29 (September 1954): 59-63.

[2] Herbert Putnam, "The Public Library in the United States: Some Recent Phases and Tendencies," *International Monthly* 3 (January 1901): 57.

[3] Walter Muir Whitehill, *Boston Public Library: A Centennial History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956): 109; see also Horace G. Wadlin, *The Public Library of the City of Boston: A History* (Boston: Printed by the Library and Published by the Trustees, 1911).

[4] Whitehill, *Boston Public Library*, 115-16; 127-30. The Librarian's duties were usurped by Board President William W. Greenough, who retired in 1888, and by Samuel Appleton Browne Abbott, his successor. Dwight was the former librarian of the Department of State and archivist of the Adams Family archives.

[5]"Mr. W. F. Poole's Remarks at the Publishers' and Booksellers' Dinner," *Library Journal* 15 (December 1890): 164-66; *Library Journal* 15 (October 1890): 291-92; 297-302. The design and cost of the building also provoked local controversy and was ultimately the subject of a mayoral investigation; see Whitehill, *Boston Public Library*, 152-58. Whitehill also discusses the 1896 controversy over the sculpture "Bacchante and Child," which was presented to the Library by architect Charles Follen McKim.

[6] C. C. Soule, "Boston Public Library," *Library Journal* 17 (February 1892): 54-55; C. C. Soule, "The Boston Public Library," *Library Journal* 17 (March 1892): 88-94; C. C. Soule, "The Boston Public Library-III," *Library Journal* 17 (April 1892): 124-25; C. C. Soule, "The Boston Public Library," *Library Journal* 17 (October 1892): 425-26. The trustees had since about 1890 been adding heavily to the Library's scholarly collections rather than concentrating on works of "common interest;" see Whitehill, 123-24.

[7]C. B. Tillinghast to Dr. Benton, 18 January 1895, Herbert Putnam Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; for the profession's reaction to the appointment, see *Library Journal* 20 (February 1895): 43.

[8] *Library Journal* 20 (June 1895): 197-98; *Boston Daily Globe*, 6 February, 14 March 1895. Librarians nevertheless continued to criticize the building; for example see *Library Journal* 21 (July 1896): 333 for a summary of William I. Fletcher's "Boston Public Library," published in *The Critic*, June 27, 1896.

[9] Putnam's letters, (Putnam Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress) reveal that his self-possessed public manner covered private misgivings and severe self-criticism, particularly before his Library of Congress appointment. His appointment to the Minneapolis directorship at a very young age almost certainly made such self-assurance a necessity.

[10] Boston Public Library Records of the Corporation, 5 February, 16 April 1895, Rare Books and Manuscripts Department, Boston Public Library (hereafter BPL Records); Charles F. D. Belden, "The Library Service of Herbert Putnam in Boston," pp. 10-14 in Bishop and Keogh, *Essays Offered to Herbert Putnam*.

[11] By-laws of the Trustees, adopted 3 December 1895, Rare Books and Manuscripts Department, Boston Public Library.

[12] *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of the City of Boston, 1895* (Boston, Rockwell and Churchill, City Printers; hereafter *Annual Report)*, 35-36.

[13] We would today call the Issue Department the Circulation Department.

[14] *Annual Report, 1895*, 50; Whitehill, *Boston Public Library*, 167.

[15]Winsor had wanted to establish a similar service but had no available space; see Whitehill, *Boston Public Library*, 146. The Children's Room was part of the original plans for the new building; see Belden, "Library Service," 11.

[16] Herbert Putnam, "The Public Library and the Common School," *The Congregationalist* 81 (13 August 1896): 214-15.

[17]Quoted in Whitehill, *Boston Public Library*, 175; for the Examining Committee report see *Annual Report, 1895*, 45.

[18] No new branch libraries had been established since 1880.

[19]*Annual Report, 1896*, 46.

[20] *Annual Report, 1895*, 32-33; *1898*, 57.

[21] Putnam had a volunteer committee read and report on new fiction, but he recommended fewer than 200 new titles each year, and he made it clear that the librarians and trustees, not the volunteers, made the selections. After his departure, and before the selection of an Acting Librarian, two Library employees protested the policy on fiction purchases. It is unclear whether the conservative selection they criticized was Putnam's policy or the trustees' decisions on fiction purchases after his departure. Putnam, however, was strict about the selection of titles for the general public, vetoing books that he considered in poor taste. List most librarians of the 1890s, he sequestered salacious titles and possibly also controversial political literature; see Evelyn Geller, *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876-1939: A Study in Cultural Change* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984): 61-66.

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[22] *Annual Report, 1897*, 42-43; *1898*, 57; *1899*, 78.

[23] These statistics should be distinguished from those of earlier reports since Putnam published only home use figures while earlier reports had taken into account the use of books within the library building.

[24] By 1898 this proportion had decreased by nearly ten percent.

[25] *Annual Report, 1898*, 38. Putnam and James Whitney, the head cataloger, attended the London meeting. Putnam was an official U.S. delegate, along with Justin Winsor and Melville Dewey.

[26] *Library Journal* 21 (October 1896): 440; 22 (Oct. 1897): C81.

[27] In fact, the original building plans did not include an office for the Librarian--an interesting indicator of the trustees' contempt for the profession; see Whitehill, *Boston Public Library*, 145.

[28] *Annual Report, 1898*, 19-20.

[29] *Annual Report, 1898*, 21. The sale of the building was mandated, and the return of the fine money was the result of an 1898 city ordinance.

[30] For the circumstances surrounding the appointment, see Jane Aikin Rosenberg, *The Nation's Great Library: Herbert Putnam and the Library of Congress, 1899-1939* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 19-22.

[31] BPL Records, 21, 24 March 1899

[32] Herbert Putnam, "The Great Libraries of the United States," *Forum* 19 (June 1895): 491-92.

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